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Cardinal Newman Society misrepresents Cardinal Newman

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NCR Today

If ever a Catholic organization was misnamed, it has to be the Cardinal Newman Society. It's almost as if believers in the flat earth theory decided to call themselves the Galileo Society.

In a recent *NCR* series, Dan Morris-Young noted that this very visible group, whose ecclesiastical adviser is Cardinal Raymond Burke, head of the Vatican's supreme court, has become a driving force in critiquing Catholic college and universities and opposing the selection of speakers it considers unacceptable. For example, the society in May protested and organized opposition to commencement-related speakers, including Kathleen Sebelius at Georgetown University; Victoria Kennedy, widow of Sen. Edward Kennedy, at Anna Maria College; and Archbishop Desmond Tutu at Gonzaga University. All hold views not in strict conformity with Catholic doctrine.

One Catholic university president calls the Newman Society "a small group of fundamentalist ideologues," according to Morris-Young. And the Association of Jesuit Universities and Colleges says the society makes "distorted claims against Catholic colleges" and often maligns them in the process.

I can only imagine what John Henry Newman might have to say about this group that so freely uses his name. It was he who lifted high the importance of the laity at a time in England when lay views were given scant attention. It was he who celebrated the idea of the consensus of the faithful and the consent of the faithful as of extreme importance in determining correct doctrine. He went so far as to claim it was the laity and not the hierarchy that preserved the church from falling into full-blown error during the Arian dispute in the 4th century. Newman clearly believed controversies should be settled by open discussion and dialogue, not by the muzzling of disagreeable voices. And it was Newman who famously upheld the supremacy of conscience in a hot discussion with an English nobleman who accused him as a Catholic of

abject deference to the papacy. Newman responded, "I shall drink to conscience first ... and to the pope afterwards."

Newman's groundbreaking positions drew harsh criticism from conservative critics. At one time he was labeled "the most dangerous man in England," and he lived many years under a cloud, barely escaping silencing or worse from the Vatican. But as often happens in the church, some 70 years after his death, many of Newman's insights became Catholic teaching at Vatican II. Pope Paul VI called that historic event "Newman's council"

I do not know what the Newman Society watchdogs found among the voluminous writings of Newman himself to justify parading him as a role model. Perhaps it's the same sort of careful selection of Vatican II readings that justifies church leaders in assuring us that the council did not introduce anything new but only restated the unchangeable.

Of one thing I'm sure. If John Henry Newman, by some miracle of grace, were to rise from the dead today and be invited to speak at a prestigious Catholic institution, the most likely organization to protest and picket the event would be the Cardinal Newman Society.

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